DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 082 326 EA 005 438

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TITLE How To Evaluate a School Board.
PUB DATE 17 Aug 73
NOTE 8p.; A weekly publication of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association
JOURNAL CIT Information Legislative Service; v11 n33 Aug 17 1973

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Board of Education Role; *Boards of Education; Cost Effectiveness; *Educational Accountability; Employer Employee Relationship; *Evaluation Criteria; Leadership; Public School Systems; *Self Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Management by Objectives; MBO

ABSTRACT

Educational accountability must be applied as diligently to school boards as it is to superintendents, administrators, and teachers. Effective appraisal can take place only when performance is compared to objectives. The successful board demonstrates a commitment to providing public accountability in all phases of its operation. It must have the means to evaluate itself critically in terms of the quality of education funded by the taxpayer, the financial commitment to the taxpayer, the existence of effective employee and community relationships, and the management leadership demonstrated. (Author)

ED 082326

Volume XI – No. 33
August 17, 1973

AUG 31 1973

Information Legislative Service

1 HOW TO EVALUATE A SCHOOL BOARD

8 MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOL BUS PLAN IMPROVES SERVICE WITH FEWER BUSES

9 NEW RESEARCH AGENCY TO DEBUT THIS FALL

10 LEGISLATIVE REPORT

12 PRINCIPALS SHOULDN'T NEGOTIATE

13 YEARS OF SCHOOLING – HOW 30 AREAS COMPARE

14 POPULATION DATA AND PROJECTIONS (Western Europe and North America)

15 UNITED STATES POPULATION PROJECTIONS (Two vs. Three-child Family)

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The following article is the text used by John F. Gamba for his workshop presentation at PSBA's Summer Conference at Lycoming College. Mr. Gambe is a board member of the West Chester Area School District.

HOW TO EVALUATE A SCHOOL BOARD

Board members have become increasingly aware of the accountability concept. We usually use the term as it relates to teachers, principals, administrators and superintendents. We are very glib in our pronouncements on the need for more evaluation and more accountability from our professional educators, and rightly so. However, we seldom take the opportunity to apply the accountability concept to our school board. Isn't it logical to assume that if a school board is at the top of the organization, it should be evaluated as critically as the professionals it employs? Of course, a few might state that the limit of our accountability is ultimately demonstrated every six years on election day; and the recent flurry of hard-fought local school board elections might support that view. However, a six-year accountability cycle fulfilled by a partisan electoral process would hardly satisfy our needs if our administrators presented such a system for their accountability.

At times, one might hear statements regarding board accountability and evaluation such as: We are the "policy-makers"; we should stay out of "administrative details"; we should support the administration; or, our concern is to provide the financial resources and buildings for the district. To some extent, I agree with these descriptions and instructions; however, if that is the limit of a school board's view of itself, then a mediocre school district is alive and well. The school district of excellence has a school board that demonstrates a commitment to provide the most effective management action possible for the school district. This effective management recognizes the school board's basic purpose and responsibility and fulfills it through appropriate managerial functions. Evaluation of a school board must direct attention to how the board is fulfilling its responsibilities in specific terms and in a systematic manner.

The school board member must be the board's most aggressive critic to insure top quality performance. The cliches mentioned above can surely be defended, but they must be put into proper perspective. We cannot use them to shield us from a rising swell of public demand that requires us to show clearly what is happening to their children and to their money. We are their agents, and we can fulfill this stewardship only by insuring effective evaluation of all segments of the school district, especially the school board.

School Board Responsibilities

The first phase in the school board evaluation requires us to determine a school board's responsibilities. Basically, the board is a legal entity with school board members serving as officials of the Commonwealth charged

with putting the Legislature's intent into each local school district. The intent as delineated in the State Constitution says: The "General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a **thorough** and **efficient** system of public schools." This constitutional charge is our basic purpose. The "thorough and efficient" school system can be translated into two interdependent areas: **first, providing a quality educational system and, secondly, insuring the lowest possible taxpayer cost.** This basic purpose must include, however, the responsibility to insure a satisfying work experience for employes and to maintain effective community relations. Once this legal and basic purpose is recognized, it provides the initial framework for evaluation.

A school board must also have a systematic approach in meeting its responsibilities, and any evaluation must include assessing the approach utilized by the school district and the school board. The board members, through the superintendent, must be the leaders of the "Management Team" and should perform specific management functions and/or insure their performance by the administrators of the district.

Therefore, there are two distinct areas of board evaluation. The first and most basic is appraising a board's ultimate accountability or effectiveness in meeting its basic legal purpose. The second is to determine if a systematic management system is in effect to enhance meeting that basic purpose.

Quality Education

A board's primary purpose is to provide that over-used term "quality education" and, therefore, evaluation of a board in this area is of paramount importance. Before we can evaluate whether a board is meeting this obligation, quality education must be defined, and the educational objectives of the district must be identified.

In 1963, the State Board of Education established a Committee on Quality Education that delineated ten goals of quality education. These goals deal with the student's understanding of self and others, verbal and mathematical skills, interest in school, citizenship, health habits, creativity, understanding of career opportunities, appreciation of the arts and sciences, and ability to meet a changing world. These objectives can provide an effective basis for evaluation. The problem is to measure accurately how well these goals are being met.

The theme of a recent PSBA Convention was "Education Is For Kids." That theme captures this basic responsibility. The board evaluation has to determine whether the education the community is funding is in the best interest of the kids. Is it **individualized** to meet student needs? Does it provide a **humane** learning environment? Are the **basic skills** being taught effectively? The most critical part in evaluating a school board in this area is to identify the means to measure this educational purpose effectively. Although this component is the most important one, there is often great difficulty in securing specific information that can be used to assess the school system's educational success or failure. An effective school board must insure the existence of such evaluation tools. We cannot account for

what we are doing or evaluate our effort until and unless we **measure** and **assess** student-oriented educational results.

There are ways that educational achievement can be measured. There are testing programs, assessments and other tools that can show the current status of educational standing in the district. The critical question here regarding a board's evaluation is: Does the board require information from the superintendent to demonstrate educational achievement to prove that "quality education" does, in fact, exist or is close at hand? Are new programs such as the open classroom, team teaching, the ungraded system, and the multitude of cure-all reading programs, evaluated to determine educational benefit and cost? New programs should be approved only when accompanied by a system of evaluation.

The evaluative information available includes standardized test scores such as the Iowa Scores for Basic Skills and other standardized or criterion test results. The Pennsylvania Educational Quality Assessment is an excellent tool to provide evaluation of the goals stated earlier. Direct observation and feedback from parents, community, and staff will also provide valuable insight as to whether the educational program is meeting the educational goals of the district. Dropout rates, follow-up programs, college board scores, and vocational-technical school graduate follow-up provide additional sources of data in evaluating quality. But these must be qualified and presented to the board and to the public.

In assessing the educational environment, we must also be sure that the individualized needs of each student are met whether the student is girl or boy, black or white, rich or poor, college-prep, or career oriented. Quality education is nonexistent if equal educational opportunity is not provided. The effective school board directs its superintendent to quantify results related to these variables to the fullest extent possible.

Financial Commitment To Taxpayer

School boards today face a financial dilemma. The taxpayer is rebelling, and costs are skyrocketing. The current state of the overburdened taxpayer is a well-known fact. The property owner in Pennsylvania is particularly hard hit by the local school district. The property tax is supplemented by a per capita, occupation, and earned income tax. Taxpayers are saying: "We have had enough!" There is a growing unwillingness to provide unlimited funds for public education.

On the other hand, inflation causes an automatic five to six percent annual increase in cost; a modern collective bargaining environment with aggressive teacher negotiations as well as state-mandated salary adjustments have meant sharp increases in the largest part of a district's budget – teacher salaries; area school district jointures have created additional cost pressures where equalization of facilities and programs are required; state-mandated programs, such as the new transportation law; and, in some locations, a rapidly expanding number of school-age children – all combine to create a demand for more educational dollars.

The effective school board must deal with this dilemma and fulfill the legal charge of the state to provide a thorough but efficient system of

public schools. Evaluation of a school board, therefore, must include a critical view of the financial management of the district. A school board's effectiveness many times is a relative measure and is not clear-cut by any means. You cannot simply say a board is unsuccessful if it spends more money than its neighboring districts. There are many variables in a school district that must be considered; such as, educational needs of its students, rate of growth of its student population, and the educational desires of the community – just to mention a few.

Evaluation of the financial management of the district includes an analysis of the multitude of comparative district financial statistics available as well as a review of the district monetary control system utilized. The statistics that should be analyzed can be garnered from several sources. The University of Pennsylvania's *Economic Aspects of Public Education in Pennsylvania* is an annual study of expenditures, revenues, taxation, salaries, staffing, and other educational indicators for most districts in the Commonwealth. Similar information can be secured from intermediate units, the State Department of Education, and PSBA.

The comparative statistics can be the source of important questions to pose to the superintendent, as well as a means of evaluation. For example, if a district had the lowest market value or ability to pay in the county and was exerting the highest effort through the local tax rate, it might be nice to know why. Expenses per pupil also provide interesting information, especially when broken down into major budget categories such as instruction, administration, pupil personnel services, etc. This data can give the evaluator a good indication of the school board's effectiveness in providing an efficient system.

Probably more important in any evaluation of a school board in meeting its financial obligation to the taxpayers is to determine the quality of the financial control system in effect. The functions in such a control system that should be fulfilled through the superintendent or his representative are:

1. **Establishment of an integrated plan for control of operations.** This would provide for expense and capital budget development, revenue forecasts, short-term investment planning, together with the necessary procedures to coordinate activities of all personnel involved.
2. **Measurement of performance against approved levels, and to report and interpret such results to all members of the "management team."** This includes the design of an accounting and cost system to show expenses and educational benefit by responsibility center; i.e., department, subject, or school. A planning, programming, budgeting, and evaluation system is the current terminology for this approach.
3. **Provision for reports to government agencies, as required, and to insure that all possible funds to which the district is legally entitled, are in fact received.**

4. **To interpret and report on the effect of external influences on the attainment of the objectives of the district**. This includes continuous appraisal of economic, social, and governmental influences, as well as demographic changes as they affect school operations.

5. **Provide protection for the assets of the district**. This includes maintaining adequate internal controls and audits and insuring proper insurance coverage.

If these functions are being fulfilled and the comparative statistics are analyzed and can be justified to the community, a school board's evaluation regarding its ability to maintain its financial commitment to the taxpayer will be successful.

Effective Employe And Community Relations

Permeating the board's basic purpose of providing quality education at the lowest cost is the ability to provide effective employe and community relations. In evaluating employe relations, the board-superintendent relationship is the focal point of attention. As the chief executive officer, the board deals with all school district employes through him. Therefore, a board's success will depend on an effective superintendent in this area (as in most other areas of evaluation). Board evaluation would include a review of the personal relationships of trust, confidence and support between board and superintendent. Also, a determination should be made as to whether a "management team" has been established and is working in a common direction for goals that are consistent with the board's basic purpose and at the same time providing individual job satisfaction.

Effective employe relations must also include a work environment that insures that the teaching force is operating in concert with the management team. This also holds true for the nonprofessional employes within the district. In fact, the entire labor relations field provides an important source of evaluation. The negotiation process, the collective bargaining agreement, and the balance between management and labor must be examined critically to determine strengths, weaknesses, and corrective action required.

Another source of evaluation is the area of equal employment opportunity. A school board committed to this goal has its equal opportunity philosophy stated as a matter of policy. The recruiting, hiring, and advancement activities of the district should be monitored and evaluated to insure discrimination does not exist. Affirmative action, to change the force composition of a district, might also be evaluated, if indeed it is required.

In evaluating a board's success in community relations, an objective appraisal must determine whether it is operating in an open and honest manner. Is it functioning in a manner that provides total public accountability? This would include public evaluations of educational achievements and disclosure of financial performance. Does a board utilize a systematic method of determining public views about district priorities

and programs, or does it use cocktail parties and pressure group input as its only source of information? Is a board willing to demonstrate its responsiveness to the public with open board meetings? Is the public welcome to utilize their own schools? Are volunteer programs in effect to provide community involvement while saving taxpayer dollars? Is the wealth of the lay talent available in many communities included on special committees and in advisory capacities to maximize total community input to the district operation? Are local newspapers and other media utilized to inform the public of school district direction, activities and results?

Providing quality education at the lowest cost is the primary purpose of a school board, but it must be done in a way that provides optimum employe and community relations within a district.

Management Leadership

An assumption throughout this paper has been that the school board is the policy-making body of the district and provides leadership through policy and direction implemented by the superintendent. The school board, therefore, has a **duty** to develop direction for the district. Establishing and clearly communicating objectives with the superintendent is one way to do this. Evaluation of a school board should determine if a vehicle is in use that enhances such direction.

A board policy can be established that delineates a Management By Objectives (MBO) System as the method used to insure a coordinated program of accountability throughout the district. This system must integrate efforts of teachers, administrators, superintendent and board into a common direction while holding all these segments accountable for learner product and cost controls. An MBO System discussion could easily be the topic for an entire workshop. In the interest of brevity, a board evaluation should determine if the following phases are in existence:

1. **Definition and agreement on job responsibility.** Board-superintendent communication is critical to insure concurrence on superintendent's responsibilities.
2. **Establishment of objectives for each job.** These objectives must be measurable, observable, and challenging, but realistic. They must be for a specific period of time and must tie-in to the overall purpose and goals of the district.
3. **Priority setting of objectives.** Objectives making the most significant contribution to the district's overall purpose must be of the highest priority.
4. **Specific plans of action.** These plans will tell how the objectives will be reached.
5. **Establishment of controls.** Controls should enable ascertainment that events are conforming to plans.
6. **Evaluation of performance and revision of objectives.** This should be done periodically, at least annually, and should be used as a basis of accountability and in some cases salary treatment.

Evaluating a school board is enhanced if a systematic method is used to establish direction and hold people accountable for results. The basic problem in determining where you are or how well you are doing is that we often do not know where we want to go. An MBO System can minimize this problem. It can be used to evaluate a board's success in meeting its responsibilities and can be used to demonstrate clearly a commitment to public accountability. It can also be used to integrate the personal goals of all employes into the overall goals of the district.

Establishing accountability and systematically evaluating a school board is not an easy task. It requires identification of our legal basic purpose and a determination if effective management action is being utilized. It then requires gathering of appropriate measurements and information related to these components. As the public's trustee and the policy-making body, a board does not directly run a school district. It must, however, through the superintendent, have a means to evaluate critically –

1. **The quality of education funded by the taxpayer.**
2. **The financial commitment to the taxpayer.**
3. **The existence of effective employe and community relations.**
4. **The management leadership demonstrated.**

These four areas of evaluation are interdependent and must be balanced. Effective appraisal can take place only when performance is compared to objectives. The successful board demonstrates a commitment to providing public accountability in all phases of its operation. It provides its superintendent direction, and then the **freedom** to succeed or fail, and is its own best critic. It constantly is looking for areas requiring improvement while recognizing strengths; it has the courage to stand up for what is right in support of its administration, but the humility to respond to legitimate concerns of its publics. It constantly recognizes its primary commitment to the students and to the taxpayers.

Now that accountability is a household word in public education, we must apply it to school boards as diligently as we apply it to superintendents, administrators and teachers. ■

STATES SPENDING THE MOST ON EDUCATION PER PUPIL

1.	New York	$1,466	6.	Connecticut	$1,110
2.	Alaska	1,441	7.	Delaware	1,097
3.	Vermont	1,199	8.	New Jersey	1,088
4.	Michigan	1,175	9.	Pennsylvania	1,073
5.	Minnesota	1,134	10.	Wisconsin	1,069

Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1972